

Indianapolis Star

Attorneys step up pro bono efforts

As the city's need for services grows, area's firms urge partners to volunteer their time.

By Russ Rizzo

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INDIANAPOLIS- Four years ago, the state Supreme Court asked law firms to address a growing problem: Not enough lawyers were donating time for pro bono work, and thousands of people were left with no legal help in civil cases.

This year, two of the state's legal giants responded.

Barnes and Thornburg, the state's largest firm, asked all of its lawyers to volunteer at least 25 hours a year helping low-income people on the clock.

The firm's 335 lawyers now can bill up to 50 hours of pro bono work, which is free legal service for people who cannot afford it.

"We're saying that instead of that week-and-a-half of work for a paying client, we want you to do this good, important pro bono work, and you're not going to get punished," said John Maley, who helped create the firm's policy. "In fact, you're going to be rewarded."

For years, lawyers at Ice Miller, the state's second-largest firm, have earned bigger bonuses by clocking pro bono hours.

This year, Ice Miller organized with the Heartland Pro Bono Council to provide more free help. A lawyer at the firm receives requests and puts a qualified person on the job.

"We are sending a message to the lawyers that pro bono work is part of their jobs as lawyers," Ice Miller managing partner Art Kalleres told The Indianapolis Star for a story published Monday.

The firms have set an important precedent for others to follow, Marion County Superior Court Judge David J. Dreyer said.

"When they say that everybody should do this, that makes it a status-quo obligation for every lawyer," said Dreyer, whom the Supreme Court appointed to boost pro bono efforts in Indianapolis. "If they do it, that's what all lawyers should be doing."

For more than a decade, lawyers at corporations such as Cinergy and Eli Lilly and Co. have offered free help to Legal Aid, which handles 8,000 cases a year with five full-time and four part-time lawyers.

But large law firms just now are getting organized to do similar work, said John Floreancig, general counsel for the Legal Aid Society, one of two pro bono organizations in Indianapolis.

Smaller firms also stepped up their efforts. All 35 lawyers at Bamberger, Foreman, Oswald & Hahn in Evansville agreed to take at least one pro bono case this year, partner Cathy Nestrick said.

Landlord disputes and divorces are among the most common types of pro bono cases. But the definition of pro bono work differs among firms.

Barnes & Thornburg used to include time working for legal organizations, like the city's bar association, Maley said. The new policy narrows the definition to providing legal advice or representation to people who cannot afford it.

Baker & Daniels considers time spent helping neighborhood organizations pro bono work.

The firm will not set a companywide goal for all lawyers to meet because free time varies for each person, Burke said. Paying lawyers for pro bono work is out of the question.

"I think pro bono ought to be that. It is what you devote to the community and to those in need," Burke said. "That there is some sort of financial compensation there, to me, means it isn't pro bono."

No matter what path firms take to offer more help, Indianapolis still has a long way to go to meet the need, Floreancig said.

"We could throw as many lawyers as we can get at the poor and still need more," he said.